

The Neo-Babylonian Empire

By Vickie Chao

In the fertile plain of Mesopotamia, the Assyrians and the Babylonians were ancient foes. But after the demise of the 1st dynasty of Babylon in 1595 B.C., the Babylonians were forced to sit on the sidelines. For the next couple of centuries, they were first ruled by the Kassites and then by their northern archrivals, the Assyrians. It wasn't until 627 B.C. that the Babylonians were once again given a chance to be their own masters. That year, the powerful Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, passed away. As the news spread, an ambitious fellow by the name of Nabopolassar jumped at the chance and revolted. The following year, in 626 B.C., he declared himself the first king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire or the Chaldean Dynasty because Chaldea, a region in southern Babylonia, was where he came from originally.



In the early days of his reign, Nabopolassar did not have full control of Mesopotamia. But after he steadily built up his armies and made an alliance with the Medes (an ancient people living in present-day Iran), he began to expand northward. His target was the Neo-Assyrian Empire. By then, the Neo-Assyrian Empire was no longer the powerhouse that it used to be. So when Nabopolassar and the Medes came to attack, the Assyrians were having a hard time fending off the coalition forces. In 612 B.C., Nabopolassar and his allies sacked the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, and killed the reigning king, Sinsharishkun. The only thing they failed to accomplish during that assault was to eradicate the Neo-Assyrian Empire completely. That was because the Egyptians, led by Pharaoh Necho II, intervened and installed a new Assyrian king in Harran. From that point on to his death, Nabopolassar did everything in his power to try to conquer the Neo-Assyrian Empire and to subdue Egypt. In 609 B.C., the Babylonians and the Medes teamed up again to plunder Harran. Their success was the last straw for the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Then in the summer of 605 B.C., Nabopolassar's son and the crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar II (or Nebuchadrezzar II), had a clash with Necho's forces at Carchemish. In that decisive battle, the brave heir apparent defeated the Egyptians and expelled them from the Middle East. Though the ultimate victory pleased Nabopolassar a great deal, he did not live long enough to enjoy it. Shortly afterwards, on August 15 or 16, 605 B.C., he died. When Nebuchadnezzar learned of the tragedy, he quickly returned to Babylon (the capital of the Chaldean Dynasty) and ascended the throne. In just a few weeks time, he had everything under control and was ready for wars again.

Now with the Neo-Assyrian Empire gone and the Egyptians in check, Nebuchadnezzar owned all of Mesopotamia and part of the Middle East. In 601 B.C., this new Babylonian King wanted to invade Egypt. But his plan went horribly wrong. Instead of an all-out victory like he had experienced at Carchemish, Nebuchadnezzar suffered a heavy loss this time around. After this humiliating defeat, several vessel states, including Judah, rebelled and broke away from the Neo-Babylonian Empire. At the time, there was not much Nebuchadnezzar could do. But after he raised a new army a year or so later, he decided to take back what was rightfully his. In 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah and laid siege to its capital, Jerusalem. According to the Old Testament, in an attempt to appease the Babylonians, the residents of Jerusalem killed their king, Jehoiakim, and threw his dead body over the wall. They surrendered on March 16, 597 B.C. Upon entering Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar first named Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin, the new King of Judah. But after a couple of months, he changed his mind and supported Zedekiah (Jehoiachin's uncle) instead. When he was ready to depart, he took Jehoiachin and thousands of Jews with him back to Babylon. He held them captive there for nearly four decades! Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor, Evil-Merodach or Amel-Marduk, released the disgraced King of Judah after he ascended the throne in 562 B.C.

By all accounts, without Nebuchadnezzar, Zedekiah could never become king. But instead of swearing his allegiance to the Neo-Babylonian Empire, he turned around to conspire with Pharaoh Apries of Egypt (also called Pharaoh Hophra) and declare independence eight years later in 589 B.C. When the news of Zedekiah's uprising reached Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King was very angry. He quickly directed his troops westward and besieged Jerusalem. After surrounding it for nearly eighteen months, Nebuchadnezzar finally broke through the city's heavy defense around 587 B.C. Now with the victory firmly in his hands, he turned merciless and razed Jerusalem to the ground. Once again, he forced many Jews into exile. This massive deportation was the infamous Babylonian Exile or Babylonian Captivity. The Jews who were displaced because of this historical event had to

bide their time in Babylonia for almost fifty years. Only after the Persians eradicated the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. were the Jews allowed to return to their lands a year later.

No doubt, Nebuchadnezzar was a gifted military commander. His genius in conducting warfare was the very reason why the territory of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was at its maximum during his reign. But aside from pitching battles, Nebuchadnezzar also spent a considerable amount of time managing the affairs of his own kingdom. He made Babylon one of the largest and most advanced cities in the world. According to various ancient sources, he constructed an arched, multi-storied building with roof gardens to please his wife. That lovely structure later became known as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to deteriorate rapidly. Over the next twenty-three years, four kings came and went, but none of them were capable enough to continue Nebuchadnezzar's legacy. Hence, when the Persian King, Cyrus the Great or Cyrus II, invaded Mesopotamia in 539 B.C., the Babylonians were like sitting ducks. Knowing that there was no way out, Nabonidus abdicated and turned over his kingdom peacefully to Persia. From the beginning to the end, the Chaldean Dynasty had a total of six emperors. In merely 87 years, this once formidable empire hit rock bottom. Never again would the Babylonians be able to rise up and reclaim their sovereignty!

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Questions

- _____ 1. Who founded the Chaldean Dynasty?
 - A. Nabopolassar
 - B. Nabonidus
 - C. Cyrus the Great
 - D. Nebuchadnezzar II
- _____ 2. Which of the following events took place first?
 - A. Cyrus the Great defeated the Neo-Babylonian Empire.
 - B. The Neo-Assyrian Empire ceased to exist.
 - C. Nabopolassar died.
 - D. The Babylonians sacked Nineveh.
- _____ 3. Who permitted the Jews, displaced because of Babylonian Exile, to return to their lands?
 - A. Necho II
 - B. Cyrus II
 - C. Nebuchadnezzar II
 - D. Apries
- _____ 4. With whose help were the Babylonians able to sack Nineveh?
 - A. The Assyrians
 - B. The Egyptians
 - C. The Persians
 - D. The Medes
- _____ 5. Which of the following about the Neo-Babylonian Empire is correct?
 - A. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was founded after the Babylonians captured Nineveh.
 - B. The Neo-Babylonian Empire never conquered the Neo-Assyrian Empire.
 - C. The Neo-Babylonian Empire was also called the Chaldean Dynasty.
 - D. Nebuchadnezzar was the founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 6. In what year did Nebuchadnezzar raze Jerusalem to the ground?
- A. 597 B.C.
 - B. 612 B.C.
 - C. 587 B.C.
 - D. 601 B.C.
- _____ 7. For how many years did Nebuchadnezzar reign?
- A. 43 years
 - B. 87 years
 - C. 23 years
 - D. 65 years
- _____ 8. Which source provided a detailed account about the Battle at Carchemish?
- A. The Old Testament
 - B. The New Testament
- _____ 9. Who was the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire?
- A. Nabonidus
 - B. Nabopolassar
 - C. Evil-Merodach
 - D. Nebuchadnezzar II
- _____ 10. Which of the following was NOT an accomplishment of Nebuchadnezzar?
- A. Made Babylon one of the greatest cities in the world
 - B. Built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon
 - C. Conquered Egypt
 - D. Won the Battle at Carchemish

Suppose you could write a eulogy for Nebuchadnezzar. What would you say?



Date _____

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